

THE END OF THE TASK

by Bruno Lessing

I

The sewing-machines whirred like a thousand devils. You have no idea what a noise thirty sewing-machines will make when they are running at full speed. Each machine is made up of dozens of little wheels and cogs and levers and ratchets, and each part tries to pound, scrape, squeak and bang and roar louder than all the others. The old man who went crazy last year in this very same shop used to sit in the cell where they chained him, with his fingers in his ears, to keep out the noise of the sewing-machines. He said the incessant din was eating into his brains, and, time and again, he tried to dash out those poor brains against the padded wall.

The sewing-machines whirred and roared and clicked, and the noise drowned every other sound. Braun finished garment after garment and arranged them in a pile beside his machine. When there were twenty in the pile he paused in his work—if your eyes were shut you would never have known that one machine had stopped—and he carried the garments to the counter, where the marker gave him a ticket for them. Then he returned to his machine. This was the routine of his daily labour from seven o'clock in the morning until seven o'clock at night. The only deviation from this routine occurred when Lizschen laid the twentieth garment that she had finished upon her pile and Braun saw her fragile figure stoop to raise the pile. Then his machine would stop, in two strides he would be at her side, and with a smile he would carry the garments to the counter for her and bring her the ticket for them. Lizschen would cease working to watch him, and when he handed her the ticket she would smile at him, and sometimes, when no one was looking, she would seize his hand and press it tightly against her cheek—oh! so tightly, as if she were drowning, and that hand were a rock of safety. And, when she resumed her work, a tear would roll slowly over the very spot where his hand had rested, tremble for an instant upon her pale cheek, and then fall upon the garment where the needle would sew it firmly into the seam. But you never would have known that two machines had stopped for a moment; there were twenty-eight others to keep up the roaring and the rattling and the hum.

On and on they roared. There was no other sound to conflict with or to vary the monotony. At each machine sat a human being working with hand, foot, and eye, watching the flashing needle, guarding the margin of the seams, jerking the cloth hither and thither quickly, accurately,

watching the spool to see that the thread ran freely, oiling the gear with one hand while the other continued to push the garment rapidly under the needle, the whole body swaying, bending, twisting this way and that to keep time and pace with the work. Every muscle of the body toiled, but the mind was free—free as a bird to fly from that suffocating room out to green fields and woods and floweret. And Braun was thinking.

Linder had told him of a wonderful place where beautiful pictures could be looked at for nothing. It was probably untrue. Linder was not above lying. Braun had been in this country six long years, and in all that time he had never found anything that could be had for nothing. Yet Linder said he had seen them. Paintings in massive gold frames, real, solid gold, and such paintings! Woodland scenes and oceans and ships and cattle and mountains, and beautiful ladies—such pictures as the theatrical posters and the lithograph advertisements on the streets displayed, only these were real. And it cost nothing to look at them!

Nineteen—twenty! That completed the pile. It had taken about an hour, and he had earned seven cents. He carried the pile to the counter, received his ticket, and returned to his machine, stopping only to smile at Lizabeth, who had finished but half a pile in that time, and who looked so white and tired, yet smiled so sweetly at him— then on with his work and thoughts.

He would take Lizabeth to see them. It was probably all a lie, but the place was far, far uptown, near Madison Square—Braun had never been north of Houston Street—and the walk might do Lizabeth good. He would say nothing to her about the pictures until he came to the place and found out for himself if Linder had told the truth. Otherwise the disappointment might do her harm.

Poor Lizabeth! A feeling of wild, blind rage overwhelmed Braun for an instant, then passed away, leaving his frame rigid and his teeth tightly clenched. While it lasted he worked like an automaton, seeing nothing, hearing nothing, feeling nothing save a chaotic tumult in his heart and brain that could find no vent in words, no audible expression save in a fierce outcry against fate—resistless, remorseless fate. A few months ago these attacks had come upon him more frequently, and had lasted for hours, leaving him exhausted and ill. But they had become rarer and less violent; there is no misfortune to which the human mind cannot ultimately become reconciled. Lizabeth was soon to die. Braun had rebelled; his heart and soul, racked almost beyond endurance, had cried out against the horror, the injustice, the wanton cruelty, of his brown-eyed, pale-cheeked Lizabeth wasting away to death before his eyes. But there was no hope, and he had gradually become reconciled. The

physician at the public dispensary had told him she might live a month or she might live a year longer, he could not foretell more accurately, but of ultimate recovery there was no hope on earth. And Braun's rebellious outbursts against cruel fate had become rarer and rarer. Do not imagine that these emotions had ever shaped themselves in so many words, or that he had attempted by any process of reasoning to argue the matter with himself or to see vividly what it all meant, what horrible ordeal he was passing through, or what the future held in store for him. From his tenth year until his twentieth Braun had worked in factories in Russia, often under the lash. He was twenty-six, and his six years in this country had been spent in sweatshops. Such men do not formulate thoughts in words: they feel dumbly, like dogs and horses.

II

The day's work was done. Braun and Lizschen were walking slowly uptown, hand in hand, attracting many an inquiring, half-pitying glance. She was so white, he so haggard and wild-eyed. It was a delightful spring night, the air was balmy and soothing, and Lizschen coughed less than she had for several days. Braun had spoken of a picture he had once seen in a shop-window in Russia. Lizschen's eyes had become animated.

"They are so wonderful, those painters," she said. "With nothing but brushes they put colours together until you can see the trees moving in the breeze, and almost imagine you hear the birds in them."

"I don't care much for trees," said Braun, "or birds either. I like ships and battle pictures where people are doing something great."

"Maybe that is because you have always lived in cities," said Lizschen. "When I was a girl I lived in the country, near Odessa, and oh, how beautiful the trees were and how sweet the flowers! And I used to sit under a tree and look at the woods across the valley all day long. Ah, if I could only!"

She checked herself and hoped that Braun had not heard. But he had heard and his face had clouded. He, too, had wished and wished and wished through many a sleepless night, and now he could easily frame the unfinished thought in Lizschen's mind. If he could send her to the country, to some place where the air was warm and dry, perhaps her days might be prolonged. But he could not. He had to work and she had to work, and he had to look on and watch her toiling, toiling, day after day, without end, without hope. The alternative was to starve.

They came to the place that Linder had described, and, surely enough, before them rose a huge placard announcing that admission to the exhibition of paintings was free. The pictures were to be sold at public auction at the end of the week, and for several nights they were on inspection. The young couple stood outside the door a while, watching the people who were going in and coming out; then Braun said:

"Come, Lizenschen, let us go in. It is free."

Lizenschen drew back timidly. "They will not let people like us go in. It is for nobility." But Braun drew her forward.

"They can do no more than ask us to go out," he said. "Besides, I would like to have a glimpse of the paintings."

With many misgivings Lizenschen followed him into the building, and found herself in a large hall, brilliantly illuminated, walled in with paintings whose gilt frames shone like fiery gold in the bright light of numerous electric lamps. For a moment the sight dazzled her, and she gasped for breath. The large room, with its soft carpet, the glittering lights and reflections, the confused mass of colours that the paintings presented to her eyes, and the air of charm that permeates all art galleries, be they ever so poor, were all things so far apart from her life, so foreign not only to her experience, but even to her imagination, that the scene seemed unreal at first, as if it had been taken from a fairy tale. Braun was of a more phlegmatic temperament, and not easily moved. The lights merely made his eyes blink a few times, and after that he saw only Lizenschen's face. He saw the blood leave it and a bright pallor overspread her cheeks, saw the frail hand move convulsively to her breast, a gesture that he knew so well, and feared that she was about to have a coughing spell. Then, suddenly, he saw the colour come flooding back to her face, and he saw her eyes sparkling, dancing with a joy that he had never seen in them before. Her whole frame seemed suddenly to become animated with a new life and vigour. Somewhat startled by this transformation he followed her gaze. Lizenschen was looking at a painting.

"What is it, dear?" he asked.

"The picture," she said in a whisper. "The green fields and that tree! And the road! It stretches over the hill! The sun will set, too, very soon. Then the sheep will come over the top of the hill. Oh, I can almost hear the leader's bell! And there is a light breeze. See the leaves of the tree; they are moving! Can't you feel the breeze? Oh, darling, isn't it wonderful? I never saw anything like that before."

Braun looked curiously at the canvas. To his eyes it presented a woodland scene, very natural, to be sure, but not more natural than nature, and equally uninteresting to him. He looked around him to select a painting upon which he could expend more enthusiasm.

"Now, there's the kind I like, Lizenschen," he said. "That storm on the ocean, with the big ship going to pieces. And that big picture over there with all the soldiers rushing to battle."

He found several others and was pointing out what he found to admire in them, when, happening to look at his companion's face, he saw that her eyes were still fastened upon the woodland picture, and he realised that she had not heard a word of what he had said. He smiled at her tenderly.

"Ah, Lizenschen," he said, "if I were rich I would take that picture right off the wall and give them a hundred dollars for it, and we would take it home with us so that Lizenschen could look at it all day

But still Lizenschen did not hear. All that big room, with its lights and its brilliant colourings, and all those people who had come in, and even her lover at her side had faded from Lizenschen's consciousness. The picture that absorbed all her being had ceased to be a mere beautiful painting. Lizenschen was walking down that road herself; the soft breeze was fanning her fevered cheeks, the rustling of the leaves had become a reality; she was walking over the hill to meet the flock of sheep, for she could hear the shepherd's dog barking and the melodious tinkling of the leader's bell.

From the moment of their entrance many curious glances had been directed at them. People wondered who this odd-looking, ill-clad couple could be. When Lizenschen became absorbed in the woodland scene and stood staring at it as if it were the most wonderful thing on earth, those who observed her exchanged glances, and several onlookers smiled. Their entrance, Lizenschen's bewilderment, and then her ecstasy over the painting had all happened in the duration of three or four minutes. The liveried attendants had noticed them and had looked at one another with glances that expressed doubt as to what their duty was under the circumstances. Clearly these were not the kind of people for whom this exhibition had been arranged. They were neither lovers of art nor prospective purchasers. And they looked so shabby and so distressingly poor and ill-nourished.

Finally one attendant, bolder than the rest, approached them, and tapping Braun lightly upon the sleeve, said, quite good-naturedly:

"I think you've made a mistake."

Braun looked at him and shook his head and turned to Lizschen to see if she understood. But Lizschen neither saw nor heard. Then the man, seeing that he was dealing with foreigners, became more abrupt in his demeanour, and, with a grunt, pointed to the door. Braun understood. To be summarily ordered from the place seemed more natural to him than to be permitted to remain unmolested amid all that splendour. It was more in keeping with the experiences of his life. "Come, Lizschen," he said, "let us go." Lizschen turned to him with a smiling face, but the smile died quickly when she beheld the attendant, and she clutched Braun's arm. "Yes, let us go," she whispered to him, and they went out.

III

On the homeward journey not a word was spoken. Braun's thoughts were bitter, rebellious; the injustice of life's arrangements rankled deeply at that moment, his whole soul felt outraged, fate was cruel, life was wrong, all wrong. Lizschen, on the other hand, walked lightly, in a state of mild excitement, all her spirit elated over the picture she had seen. It had been but a brief communion with nature, but it had thrilled the hidden chords of her nature, chords of whose existence she had never dreamed before. Alas! the laws of this same beautiful nature are inexorable. For that brief moment of happiness Lizschen was to submit to swift, terrible punishment. Within a few steps of the dark tenement which Lizschen called home a sudden weakness came upon her, then a violent fit of coughing which racked her frail body as though it would render it asunder. When she took her hands from her mouth Braun saw that they were red. A faintness seized him, but he must not yield to it. Without a word he gathered Lizschen in his arms and carried her through the hallway into the rear building and then up four flights of stairs to the apartment where she lived.

Then the doctor came — he was a young man, with his own struggle for existence weighing upon him, and yet ever ready for such cases as this where the only reward lay in the approbation of his own conscience — and Braun hung upon his face for the verdict.

"It is just another attack like the last," he was saying to himself. "She will have to lie in bed for a day, and then she will be just as well as before. Perhaps it may even help her! But it is nothing more serious. She has had many of them. I saw them myself. It is not so terribly serious. Not yet. Oh, it cannot be yet! Maybe, after a long time—but not yet—it is too soon." Over and over again he argued thus, and in his heart did not believe it. Then the doctor shook his head and said: "It's near the end,

my friend. A few days — perhaps a week. But she cannot leave her bed again."

Braun stood alone in the room, upright, motionless, with his fist clenched until the nails dug deep into the skin, seeing nothing, hearing nothing, feeling nothing. His eyes were dry, his lips parched. The old woman with whom Lizenschen lived came out and motioned to him to enter the bedroom. Lizenschen was whiter than the sheets, but her eyes were bright, and she was smiling and holding out her arms to him. "You must go now, Liebchen," she said faintly. "I will be all right to-morrow. Kiss me good-night, and I will dream about the beautiful picture." He kissed her and went out without a word. All that night he walked the streets.

When the day dawned he went to her again.

She was awake and happy. "I dreamt about it all night, Liebchen," she said, joyfully. "Do you think they would let me see it again?"

He went to his work, and all that day the roar of the machines set his brain a-whirring and a-roaring as if it, too, had become a machine. He worked with feverish activity, and when the machines stopped he found that he had earned a dollar and five cents. Then he went to Lizenschen and gave her fifty cents, which he told her he had found in the street. Lizenschen was much weaker, and could only speak in a whisper. She beckoned to him to hold his ear to her lips, and she whispered:

"Liebchen, if I could only see the picture once more."

"I will go and ask them, darling," he said. "Perhaps they will let me bring it to you."

Braun went to his room and took from his trunk a dagger that he had brought with him from Russia. It was a rusty, old-fashioned affair which even the pawnbrokers had repeatedly refused to accept. Why he kept it or for what purpose he now concealed it in his coat he could not tell. His mind had ceased to work coherently: his brain was now a machine, whirring and roaring like a thousand devils. Thought? Thought had ceased. Braun was a machine, and machines do not think.

He walked to the picture gallery. He had forgotten its exact location, but some mysterious instinct guided him straight to the spot. The doors were already opened, but the nightly throng of spectators had hardly begun to arrive. And now a strange thing happened. Braun entered and walked straight to the painting of the woodland scene that hung near the door. There was no attendant to bar his progress. A small group of persons,

gathered in front of a canvas that hung a few feet away, had their backs turned to him, and stood like a screen between him and the employees of the place. Without a moment's hesitation, without looking to right or to left, walking with a determined stride and making no effort to conceal his purpose, and, at the same time, oblivious of the fact that he was unobserved, Braun approached the painting, raised it from the hook, and, with the wire dangling loosely from it, took the painting under his arm and walked out of the place. If he had been observed, would he have brought his dagger into use? It is impossible to tell. He was a machine, and his brain was roaring. Save for one picture that rose constantly before his vision, he was blind. All that he saw was Lizschen, so white in her bed, waiting to see the woodland picture once more.

He brought it straight to her room. She was too weak to move, too worn out to express any emotion, but her eyes looked unutterable gratitude when she saw the painting.

"Did they let you have it?" she whispered.

"They were very kind," said Braun. "I told them you wanted to see it and they said I could have it as long as I liked. When you are better I will take it back."

Lizschen looked at him wistfully. "I will never be better, Liebchen," she whispered.

Braun hung the picture at the foot of the bed where Lizschen could see it without raising her head, and then went to the window and sat there looking out into the night. Lizschen was happy beyond all bounds. Her eyes drank in every detail of the wonderful scene until her whole being became filled with the delightful spirit that pervaded and animated the painting. A master's hand had imbued that deepening blue sky with the sadness of twilight, the soft, sweet pathos of departing day, and Lizschen's heart beat responsive to every shade and shadow. In the waning light every outline was softened; here tranquillity reigned supreme, and Lizschen felt soothed. Yet in the distance, across the valley, the gloom of night had begun to gather. Once or twice Lizschen tried to penetrate this gloom, but the effort to see what the darkness was hiding tired her eyes.

IV

The newspapers the next day were full of the amazing story of the stolen painting. They told how the attendants at the gallery had discovered the

break in the line of paintings and had immediately notified the manager of the place, who at once asked the number of the picture.

"It's number thirty-eight," they told him. He seized a catalogue, turned to No. 38, and turned pale. "Corot's Spring Twilight!" he cried. "It cost the owner three thousand dollars, and we're responsible for it!"

The newspapers went on to tell how the police had been notified, and how the best detectives had been set to work to trace the stolen painting, how all the thieves' dens in New York had been ransacked, and all the thieves questioned and cross-questioned, all the pawnshops searched—and it all had resulted in nothing. But such excitement rarely leaks into the Ghetto, and Braun, at his machine, heard nothing of it, knew nothing of it, knew nothing of anything in the world save that the machines were roaring away in his brain and that Lizabeth was dying. As soon as his work was done he went to her. She smiled at him, but was too weak to speak. He seated himself beside the bed and took her hand in his. All day long she had been looking at the picture; all day long she had been wandering along the road that ran over the hill, and now night had come and she was weary. But her eyes were glad, and when she turned them upon Braun he saw in them love unutterable and happiness beyond all description. His eyes were dry; he held her hand and stroked it mechanically; he knew not what to say. Then she fell asleep and he sat there hour after hour, heedless of the flight of time. Suddenly Lizabeth sat upright, her eyes wide open and staring.

"I hear them," she cried. "I hear them plainly. Don't you, Liebchen? The sheep are coming! They're coming over the hill! Watch, Liebchen; watch, precious!"

With all the force that remained in her she clutched his hand and pointed to the painting at the foot of the bed. Then she swayed from side to side, and he caught her in his arms.

"Lizabeth!" he cried. "Lizabeth!" But her head fell upon his arm and lay motionless.

The doctor came and saw at a glance that the patient was beyond his ministering. "It is over, my friend," he said to Braun. At the sound of a voice Braun started, looked around him quite bewildered, and then drew a long breath which seemed to lift him out of the stupor into which he had fallen. "Yes, it is over," he said, and, according to the custom of the orthodox, he tore a rent in his coat at the neck to the extent of a hand's breadth. Then he took the painting under his arm and left the house.

It was now nearly two o'clock in the morning and the streets were deserted. A light rain had begun to fall, and Braun took off his coat to wrap it around his burden. He walked like one in a dream, seeing nothing, hearing nothing save a dull monotonous roar which seemed to come from all directions and to centre in his brain.

The doors of the gallery were closed and all was dark. Braun looked in vain for a bell, and after several ineffectual taps on the door began to pound lustily with his fist and heel. Several night stragglers stopped in the rain, and presently a small group had gathered. Questions were put to Braun, but he did not hear them. He kicked and pounded on the door, and the noise resounded through the streets as if it would rouse the dead. Presently the group heard the rattling of bolts and the creaking of a rusty key in a rusty lock, and all became quiet. The door swung open, and a frightened watchman appeared.

"What's the matter? Is there a fire?" he asked.

A policeman made his way through the group, and looked inquiringly from Braun to the watchman. Without uttering a word Braun held out the painting, and at the sight of it the watchman uttered a cry of amazement and delight.

"It's the stolen Corot!" he exclaimed. Then turning to Braun, "Where did you get it? Who had it? Do you claim the reward?"

Braun's lips moved, but no sound came from them, and he turned on his heel and began to walk off when the policeman laid a hand on his shoulder.

"Not so fast, young man. You'll have to give some kind of an account of how you got this," he said.

Braun looked at him stupidly, and the policeman became suspicious. "I guess you'd better come to the station-house," he said, and without more ado walked off with his prisoner. Braun made no resistance, felt no surprise, offered no explanation. At the station-house they asked him many questions, but Braun only looked vacantly at the questioner, and had nothing to say. They locked him in a cell over night, a gloomy cell that opened on a dimly lighted corridor, and there Braun sat until the day dawned, never moving, never speaking. Once, during the night, the watchman on duty in this corridor thought he heard a voice whispering "Lizschen! Lizschen!" but it must have been the rain that now was pouring in torrents.

V

"There the wicked cease from troubling; and there the weary be at rest.

"There the prisoners rest together; they hear not the voice of the oppressor.

"The small and the great are there; and the servant is free from his master."

It is written in Israel that the rabbi must give his services at the death-bed of even the lowliest. The coffin rested on two stools in the same room in which she died; beside it stood the rabbi, clad in sombre garments, reading in a listless, mechanical fashion from the Hebrew text of the Book of Job, interpolating here and there some time-worn, commonplace phrase of praise, of exhortation, of consolation. He had not known her; this was merely part of his daily work.

The sweatshop had been closed for an hour; for one hour the machines stood silent and deserted; the toilers were gathered around the coffin, listening to the rabbi. They were pale and gaunt, but not from grief. The machines had done that. They had rent their garments at the neck, to the extent of a hand's breadth, but not from grief. It was the law. A figure that they had become accustomed to see bending over one of the machines had finished her last garment. Dry-eyed, in a sort of mild wonder, they had come to the funeral services. And some were still breathing heavily from the morning's work. After all, it was pleasant to sit quiet for one hour.

Someone whispered the name of Braun, and they looked around. Braun was not there.

"He will not come," whispered one of the men. "It is in the newspaper. He was sent to prison for three years. He stole something. A picture, I think. I am not sure."

Those who heard slowly shook their heads. There was no feeling of surprise, no shock. And what was there to say? He had been one of them. He had drunk out of the same cup with them. They knew the taste. What mattered the one particular dreg that he found? They had no curiosity. In the case of Nitza, it was her baby who was dying because she could not buy it the proper food. Nitza had told them. And so when Nitza cut her throat they all knew what she had found in the cup. Braun hadn't told—but what mattered it? Probably something more bitter than

gall. And three years in prison? Yes. To be sure. He had stolen something.

"Wherefore is light given to him that is in misery," droned the rabbi, "and life unto the bitter in soul:

"Which long for death, but it cometh not; and dig for it more than for hid treasures;

"Which rejoice exceedingly, and are glad, when they can find the grave?"

And the rabbi, faithful in the performance of his duty, went on to expound and explain. But his hearers could not tarry much longer. The hour was nearing its end, and the machines would soon have to start again.

It is an old story in the Ghetto, one that lovers tell to their sweethearts, who always cry when they hear it. The machines still roar and whirr, as if a legion of wild spirits were shrieking within them, and many a tear is stitched into the garments, but you never see them, madame—no, gaze as intently upon your jacket as you will, the tear has left no stain. There is an old man at the corner machine, grey-haired and worn, but he works briskly. He is the first to arrive each morning, and the last to leave each night, and all his soul is in his work. His machine is an old one, and roars louder than the rest, but he does not hear it. Day and night, sleeping and waking, there are a hundred thousand machines roaring away in his brain. What cares he for one more or one less?